

Imperial China, 589–1368

- ◆ Reestablishment of Empire: Sui (589–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties
- ◆ Transition to Late Imperial China: The Song Dynasty (960–1279)
- ◆ China in the Mongol World Empire: The Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)



I

F CHINESE DYNASTIES FROM THE LATE SIXTH TO THE mid-fourteenth centuries were given numbers like those of ancient Egypt, the Sui and Tang dynasties would be called the Second Empire; the Song, the Third; and the Yuan, the Fourth. Numbers would not convey the distinct personalities of these dynasties, however. The Tang (618–907) is everyone's favorite dynasty: open, cosmopolitan, expansionist, exuberant, and creative. It was the example of Tang China that decisively influenced the formation

of states and high cultures in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Poetry during the Tang attained a peak that has not been equaled since. The Song (960–1279) rivaled the Tang in the arts; it was China's great age of painting and the most significant period for philosophy since the Zhou, when Chinese philosophy began. Although not militarily strong, the Song dynasty also witnessed an important commercial revolution. The Yuan (1279–1368) was a short-lived dynasty of rule by Mongols during which China became the most important unit in the largest empire the world has yet seen.

Imperial China



Rough parallels between China and Europe persisted until the sixth century C.E. Both saw the rise and fall of great empires. At first glance, the three and a half centuries that followed the Han dynasty appear remarkably similar to the comparable period after the collapse of the Roman Empire: Central authority broke down, private armies arose, and aristocratic estates were established. Barbarian tribes once allied to the empires invaded and pillaged large areas. Otherworldly religions entered to challenge earlier official worldviews. In China, Neo-Daoism and then Buddhism challenged Confucianism, just as Christianity challenged Roman conceptions of the sociopolitical order.

But from the late sixth century C.E., a fundamental divergence occurred. Europe tailed off into centuries of feudal disunity and backwardness. A ghost of empire lingered in the European memory. But the reality, even after centuries had passed, was that tiny areas like France (one seventeenth the size of China), Italy (one thirty-second), or

Germany (one twenty-seventh) found it difficult to establish an internal unity, much less re-create a pan-European or pan-Mediterranean empire. In contrast, China, which is about the size of Europe and geographically no more naturally a political unit, put a unified empire back together again, attaining new wealth, power, culture, and unified rule that has continued until the present. What explains the difference?

One reason the empire was reconstituted in China was that the victory of Buddhism in China was less complete than that of Christianity in Europe. Confucianism, and its conception of a unified empire, survived within the aristocratic families and at the courts of the Six Dynasties. It is difficult even to think of Confucianism apart from the idea of a universal ruler, aided by men of virtue and ability, ruling "all under Heaven" according to Heaven's Mandate. In contrast, the Roman concept of political order was not maintained as an independent doctrine. Moreover, empire was not a vital element in Christian thought—except perhaps in Byzantium, where the empire lasted longer than it did in Western Europe. The notion of a "Christian king" did appear

Reestablishment of Empire: Sui (589–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties

In the period corresponding to the European early Middle Ages, the most notable feature of Chinese history was the reunification of China, the re-creation of a centralized bureaucratic empire consciously modeled on the earlier Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Reunification, as usual, began in the north. The first steps were taken by the Northern Wei (386–534), the most enduring of the northern Sino-Turkic states. It moved its court south to Luoyang, made Chinese the language of the court, and adopted Chinese dress and surnames. It also used the leverage of its nomadic cavalry to impose a new land tax, mobilizing resources for state use. The Northern Wei was followed by several short-lived kingdoms. Because the emperors, officials, and military commanders of these kingdoms came from the same

aristocratic stratum, the social distance between them was small, and the throne was often usurped.

The Sui Dynasty

The general of mixed Chinese-Turkic ancestry, Sui Wendi (d. 605), who came to power in 581 and began the Sui dynasty (589–618), was no exception to this rule. But he displayed great talent, unified the north, restored the tax base, reestablished a centralized bureaucratic government, and went on to conquer southern China and unify the country. During his reign, all went well. Huge palaces arose in his Wei valley capital. The Great Wall was rebuilt. The Grand Canal was constructed, linking the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. This canal enabled the northern conquerors to tap the wealth of central and southern China. Peace was maintained with the Turkic tribes along China's northern borders. Eastern Turkic khans (chiefs) were sent Chinese princesses as brides.

in the West, but basically, the kingdom sought by Jesus was not of this world.

A second consideration was China's greater cultural homogeneity. It had a common written language that was fairly close to all varieties of spoken Chinese. Minority peoples and even barbarian conquerors—apart from the Mongols—were rapidly Sinicized. In contrast, after Rome the Mediterranean fell apart into its component cultures. Latin became the universal language of the Western church, but for most Christians it was a foreign language, a part of the mystery of the Mass, and even in Italy it became an artificial language, separate from the living tongue. European languages and cultures were divisive forces.

A third and perhaps critical factor was China's population density, at least fifteen times greater than that of France, Europe's most populous state. Population density explains why the Chinese could absorb barbarian conquerors so much more quickly than could Europe. More cultivators provided a larger agricultural surplus to the northern kingdoms than that enjoyed by comparable kingdoms in Europe. Greater numbers of people also meant better communications and a better base for commerce. To be sure, the centuries that followed the Han saw a decline in commerce and cities. In some areas barter or the use of silk as currency replaced money, but the economic level

The early years of the second Sui emperor were also constructive, but then Chinese attempts to meddle in steppe politics led to hostilities and wars. The hardships and casualties in campaigns against Korea and along China's northern border produced rising discontent. Natural disasters occurred. The court became bankrupt and demoralized. Rebellions broke out, and once again, there was a free-for-all among the armies of aristocratic military commanders. The winner, and the founder of the Tang dynasty, was a relative of the Sui empress and a Sino-Turkic aristocrat of the same social background as those who had ruled before him.

Chinese historians often compare the short-lived Sui dynasty with that of the Qin (256–206 B.C.E.). Each brought all of China under a single government after centuries of disunity. Each did too much, fell, and was replaced by a long-lasting dynasty. The Tang built on the foundations that had been laid by the Sui, just as the Han had built on those of the Qin.

remained higher than in early medieval Europe. Several of the factors that explain the Sui-Tang regeneration of a unified empire apply equally well or better to the Song and subsequent dynasties. Comparisons across continents are difficult, but it seems likely that Tang and Song China had longer stretches of good government than any other part of the contemporary world. Not until the nineteenth century did comparable bureaucracies of talent and virtue appear in the West.

Thinking Questions

- ✦ In what ways did China and Europe parallel each other in their development until the sixth century C.E.? How did they diverge after that?
- ✦ Why did China witness the reunification of empire after the fall of the Han dynasty, whereas after the fall of Rome, Europe was never again united in a single empire?
- ✦ Why did Tang and Song China enjoy longer stretches of good government than anywhere else in the contemporary world during the same period?

The Tang Dynasty

The first Tang emperor took over the Sui capital, renamed it Chang'an, and made it his own. Within a decade or so the new dynasty had extended its authority over all of China; tax revenues were adequate for government needs; and Chinese armies had begun the campaigns that would push Chinese borders out further than ever (see Map 8–1). Confucian scholars were employed at the court, Buddhist temples and monasteries flourished, and peace and order prevailed in the land. The years from 624 to 755 were the good years of the dynasty.

Government The first Tang emperor had been a provincial governor before he became a rebel general. Many of those whom he appointed to posts in his new administration were former Sui officials who had served with him. In building the new administration, he and his successors had to reconcile two conflicting sets of interests. On the one hand, the emperor wanted a bureaucratic government in which authority was centralized in his own person. On the other

Tang Government Organization

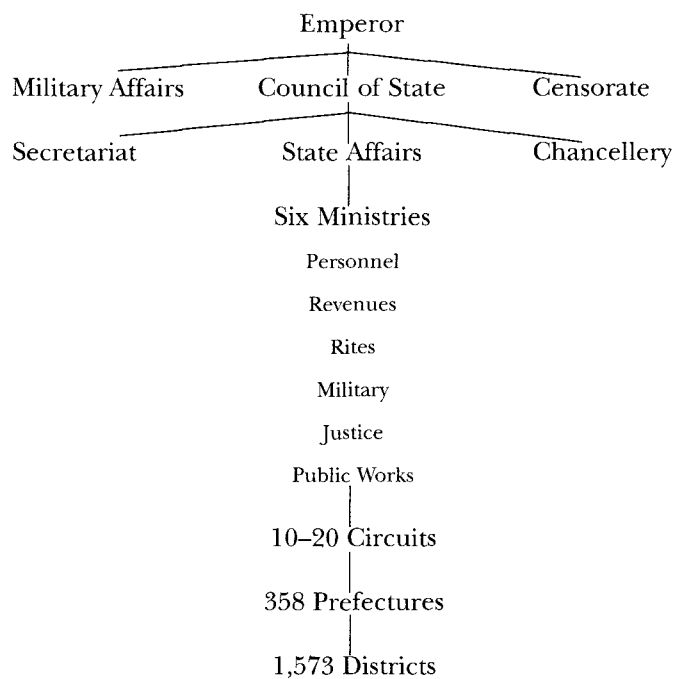


Figure 8-1. Tang Government Organization.

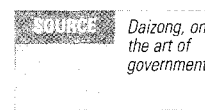
hand, he had to make concessions to the aristocrats—the dominant elements in Chinese society in the Late Han—who staffed his government and continued to dominate early Tang society.

The degree to which political authority was centralized was apparent in the formal organization of the bureaucracy. At the highest level were three organs: Military Affairs, the **Censorate**, and the Council of State (see Figure 8-1). Military Affairs supervised the Tang armies, with the emperor, in effect, the commander-in-chief. The Censorate had watchdog functions: It reported instances of misgovernment directly to the emperor and could also remonstrate with the emperor when it considered his behavior improper. The Council of State was the most important body. It met daily with the emperor and was made up of the heads of the Secretariat, which drafted policies; the Chancellery, which reviewed them; and State Affairs, which carried them out. Beneath State Affairs were the Six Ministries, which continued as the core of the central government down to the twentieth century; beneath them were the several levels of local administration.

Concessions to the interests of the aristocratic families were embodied in the tax system. All land was declared to be

the property of the emperor and was then redistributed to able-bodied cultivators, who paid taxes in labor and grain. Because all able-bodied adult males received an equal allotment of land (women got less), the land-tax system was called the “equal field system.” But the system was not egalitarian. Aristocrats enjoyed special exemptions and grants of “rank” and “office” lands that, in effect, confirmed their estate holdings.

Aristocrats were also favored in the recruiting of officials. Most officials either were recommended for posts or received posts because their fathers had been high officials.



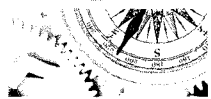
They were drawn almost exclusively from the aristocracy. Only a tiny percentage were recruited by examinations. Those who passed the examinations

had the highest prestige and were more likely to have brilliant careers. But as only well-to-do families could afford the years of study needed to master the Confucian classics and pass the rigorous examinations, even the examination bureaucrats were usually the able among the noble. Entrance to government schools at Chang'an and the secondary capital at Luoyang was restricted to the sons of nobles and officials.

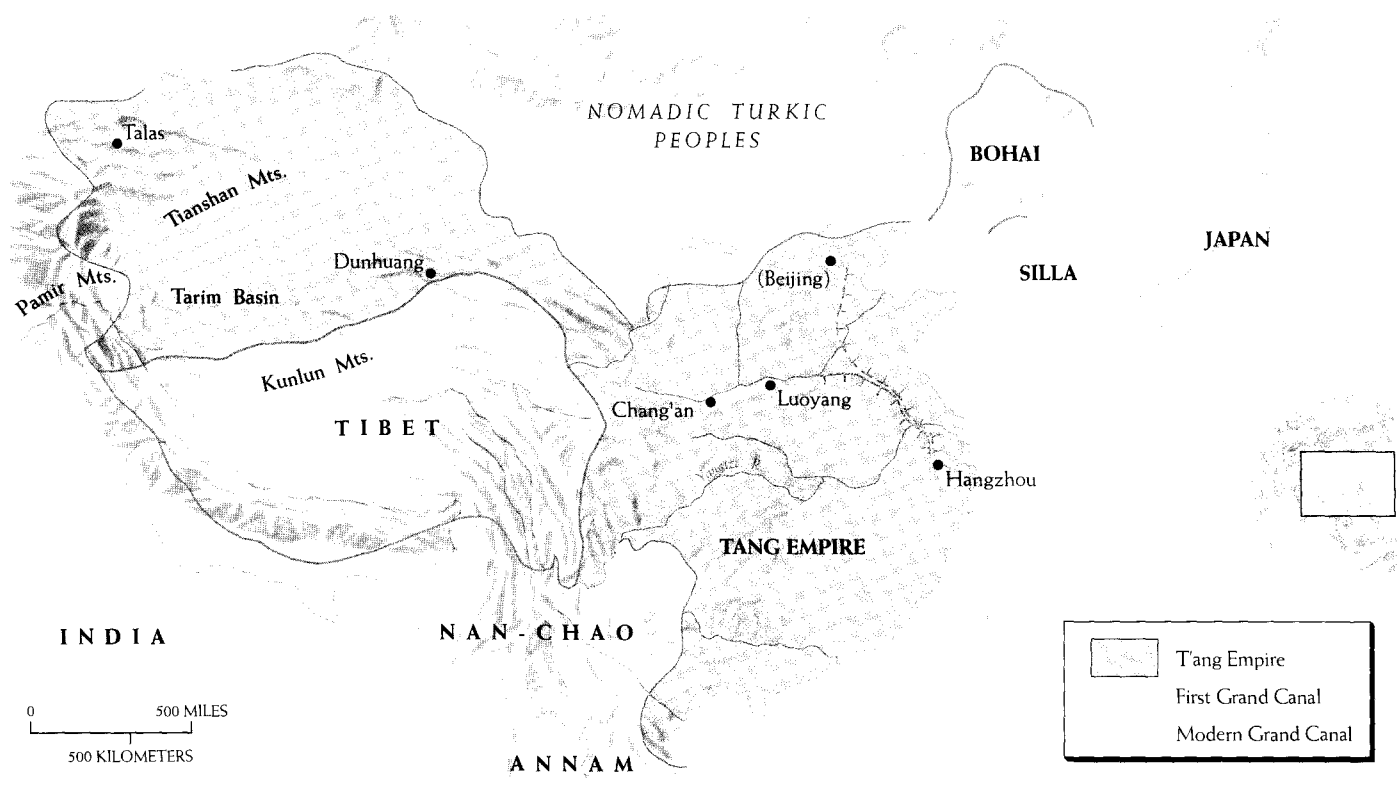
The Empress Wu Women of the inner court continued to play a role in government. For example, Wu Zhao (626–ca. 706), a young concubine of the strong second emperor, had so entranced his weak heir by her charms that when he succeeded to the throne, she was recalled from the nunnery to which all the former wives of deceased emperors were routinely consigned and installed at the court. She poisoned or otherwise removed her rivals and became his empress. She also had murdered or exiled the statesmen who opposed her. When the emperor suffered a stroke in 660, she completely dominated the court. After his death in 683 she ruled for seven years as regent and then, deposing her son, became emperor herself, the only woman in Chinese history to hold the title. She moved the court to Luoyang in her native area and proclaimed a new dynasty. A fervent Buddhist with an interest in magic, she saw herself as the incarnation of the messianic Buddha Maitreya and built temples throughout the land. She patronized the White Horse Monastery, appointing one of her favorites as its abbot. Her sexual appetites were said to have been prodigious. She ruled China until 705, when at the age of eighty she was deposed.

After Empress Wu, no woman would ever become emperor again; yet her machinations did not seriously weaken the court. So highly centralized was power during these early years of the dynasty that the ill effects of her intrigues could be absorbed without provinces breaking away or military commanders becoming autonomous. In fact, her struggle for power may have strengthened the central gov-

Map Exploration



To explore this map further, go to http://www.prenhall.com/craig_maps



Map 8-1. The Tang Empire at Its Peak During the Eighth Century. The Tang expansion into Central Asia reopened trade routes to the Middle East and Europe. Students from Bohai, Silla (Korea), and Japan studied in the Tang capital of Chang'an and then returned, carrying with them Tang books and technology.

ernment, for, to overcome the old northwestern Chinese aristocrats, she turned not to members of her family but to the products of the examination system and to a group known as the Scholars of the North Gate. This policy broadened the base of government by bringing in aristocrats from other regions of China. The dynamism of a young dynasty may also explain why her rule coincided with the maximal geographical expansion of Tang military power.

The Chang'an of Emperor Xuan Zong Only a few years after Empress Wu was deposed—years filled with tawdry intrigues—Xuan Zong came to the throne. In reaction to Empress Wu, he appointed government commissions headed by distinguished aristocrats to reform government finances. Examination bureaucrats lost ground during his reign. The Grand Canal was repaired and extended. A new

census extended the tax rolls. Wealth and prosperity returned to the court. His reign (713–756) was also culturally brilliant. Years later, while in exile, the great poet Li Bo (701–762) wrote a verse in which memories of youthful exhilaration merged with the glory of the capital of Xuan Zong:

*Long ago, among the flowers and willows,
We sat drinking together at Chang'an.
The Five Barons and Seven Grandees were of our company,
But when some wild stroke was afoot
It was we who led it, yet boisterous though we were
In the arts and graces of life we could hold our own
With any dandy in the town—
In the days when there was youth in your cheeks
And I was still not old.
We galloped to the brothels, cracking our gilded whips,*

We sent in our writings to the palace of the Unicorn,
Girls sang to us and danced hour by hour on tortoise-shell
mats.

We thought, you and I, that it would be always like this.
How should we know the grasses would stir and dust rise
on the wind?

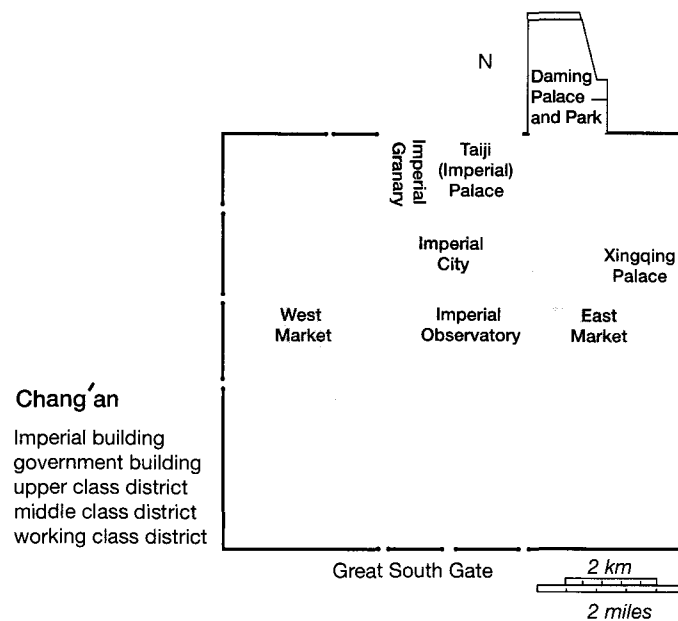
Suddenly foreign horsemen were at the Hsien-ku Pass
Just when the blossom at the palace of Ch'in was opening
on the sunny boughs.¹

Chang'an was an imperial city, an administrative center that lived on taxes (see Map 8-2). It was designed to exhibit the power of the emperor and the majesty of his court. At the far north of the city, the palace faced south. The placement was traditional: Confucius, speaking of Shun, said he had only "to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south." In front of the palace was a complex of government offices from which an imposing five-hundred-foot-wide avenue led to the main southern gate. The city was laid out on a north-south, east-west grid, which one Tang poet compared to a chessboard. Each block of the city was administered as a ward with interior streets and gates that were locked at night. Enclosed by great walls, the city covered thirty square miles. Its population was over 1 million: half within the walls, the other half in suburbs—the largest city in the world. (The population of China in the year 750 was about 50 million—about 4 percent of the country's present-day population.) Chang'an was also a trade center from which caravans set out across Central Asia. Merchants from India, Persia, Syria, and Arabia hawked the wares of the Near East and all of Asia in its two government-controlled markets.

The Tang Empire A Chinese dynasty is like an accordion, first expanding into the territories of its barbarian neighbors and then contracting back to its original, densely populated core area. The principal threats to the Tang state were from Tibetans in the west, Turks in the northwest and north, and Khitan Mongols in Manchuria.

To protect its border, the Tang employed a four-tier policy. When nothing else would work, the Tang sent armies. But armies were expensive, and using them against nomads was like sweeping back the waves with a broom. A victory might dissolve a tribal confederation, but a decade or two later it would reappear under a new leader. For example, in 630 Tang armies defeated the eastern Turks; in 648 they took the Tarim Basin, opening trade routes to western Asia for almost a century; and in 657 they defeated the western Turks and extended Chinese influence across the Pamir

¹ Arthur Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po*. © 1950, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd.



Map 8-2. Chang'an. The great city of Chang'an had been a Chinese capital since the Han period. By the eighth century there were around a half-million people within the city walls, with the same number close by outside, making it the largest city in the world at the time. The rigorous grid structure accommodated a variety of districts, each with its own function.

Mountains to petty states near Samarkand. By 698, however, the Turks were back invading northeastern China, and between 711 and 736 they were in control of the steppe from the Oxus River to China's northern frontier.

Chinese efforts against Tibet were much the same. From 670 Tibet expanded and threatened China. In 679 it was defeated. In 714 it rose again; wars were fought from 727 to 729; and a settlement was reached in 730. But war broke out anew. In 752 Tibet entered an alliance with the state of Nan Chao in Yunnan. In 763 Tibetan forces captured and looted Chang'an. They were driven out, but the point is that even during the good years of the Tang, no final victory was possible.

The human costs of sending armies far afield was detailed in a poem by Li Bo:

*Last year we were fighting at the source of the Sang-kan;
This year we are fighting on the Onion River road.
We have washed our swords in the surf of Parthian seas;
We have pastured our horses among the snows of the
Tien Shan,
The King's armies have grown grey and old
Fighting ten thousand leagues away from home.
The Huns have no trade but battle and carnage;*



*They have no fields or ploughlands,
But only wastes where white bones lie among yellow sands.
Where the House of Ch'in built the great wall that was to
keep away the Tartars.
There, in its turn, the House of Han lit beacons of war.
The beacons are always alight, fighting and marching
never stop.
Men die in the field, slashing sword to sword;
The horses of the conquered neigh piteously to Heaven.
Crows and hawks peck for human guts,
Carry them in their beaks and hang them on the branches
of withered trees.
Captains and soldiers are smeared on the bushes and grass;
The general schemed in vain.
Know therefore that the sword is a cursed thing
Which the wise man uses only if he must.²*

The second tier of Chinese defenses was to use nomads against other nomads. The critical development for the Tang was the rise to power of the Uighur Turks. From 744 to 840, the Uighurs controlled Central Asia and were staunch allies of the Tang. Without their support, the Tang dynasty would have ended sooner.

A third tier was the defense along China's borders, including the Great Wall. At mid-dynasty, whole frontier provinces in the north and the northwest were put under military commanders, who in time came to control the provinces' civil governments as well. The bulk of the Tang military was in such frontier commands. At times their autonomy and potential as rebels were as much a threat to the Tang court as to the nomadic enemy.

Diplomacy is cheaper than war. The fourth line of defense was to bring the potential enemy into the empire as a tributary. The Tang defined the position of "tributary" with great elasticity. It included principalities truly dependent on China; Central Asian states conquered by China; enemy states, such as Tibet or the Thai state of Nan Chao in Yunnan, when they were not actually at war with China; the Korean state of Silla, which had unified the peninsula with Tang aid but had then fought Tang armies to a standstill when they attempted to impose Chinese hegemony; and wholly independent states, such as Japan. All sent embassies bearing gifts to the Tang court, which housed and fed them and sent back costly gifts in return.

For some countries these embassies had a special significance. As the only "developed nation" in eastern Asia, China was a model for countries still in the throes of statehood. An embassy gained access to the entire range of

Tang culture and technology: its philosophy and writing; governmental and land systems; Buddhism; and the arts, architecture, and medicine. In 640 there were 8,000 Koreans, mostly students, in Chang'an. Never again would China exert such an influence, for never again would its neighbors be at that formative stage of development.



Rebellion and Decline From the mid-eighth century, signs of decline began to appear. China's frontiers started to contract. Tribes in Manchuria became unruly. Tibetans threatened China's western border. In 751 an overextended Tang army led by a Korean general was defeated by Arabs near Samarkand in western Asia, shutting down China's caravan trade with the West for more than five centuries. Furthermore, in 755 a Sogdian general, An Lushan, who commanded three Chinese provinces on the northeastern frontier, led his 160,000 troops in a rebellion that swept across northern China, capturing Luoyang and then Chang'an. The emperor fled to Sichuan.

The event contained an element of romance. Ten years earlier the emperor Xuan Zong had taken a young woman, Yang Guifei, from the harem of his son (he gave his son another beauty in exchange). So infatuated was he that he neglected not only the other "three thousand beauties of his inner chambers," but the business of government as well. For a while his neglect did not matter because he had an able chief minister, but when the minister died Xuan Zong appointed his concubine's second cousin to the post, initiating a chain of events that resulted in rebellion. En route to Sichuan, his soldiers, blaming Yang Guifei for their plight, strangled her. The event was later immortalized in a poem that described her "snow-white skin," "flowery face," and "moth eyebrows," as well as the "eternal sorrow" of the emperor, who, in fact, was seventy-two at the time.

Chronology

Imperial China

589–618	Sui dynasty
618–907	Tang dynasty
960–1279	Song dynasty
1279–1368	Yuan (Mongol) dynasty

² Waley, pp. 34–35.

Chinese Policy Towards Barbarians

For much of the history of the Chinese Empire, nomadic peoples from the west and north, whom the Chinese considered to be barbarians, posed a recurrent threat. The imperial Chinese government adopted a variety of strategies for dealing with this threat.

Armies

When nothing else worked, the Chinese went on the offensive and sent armies against the nomads. But armies were expensive, and victories over nomads were transitory. Within a few years the tribes would regroup and menace China anew.

Nomads against nomads

A second strategy was to obtain allies from the nomads along China's borders and use them against more distant nomads. To win over neighboring tribes, a variety of bribes was employed.

Border defense

In the north, an inner line of defense was the Great Wall. Also, late in dynasties, northern provinces were often placed under military governors.

Diplomacy

China sought to neutralize its neighbors by loosely attaching them to its empire. Nomadic tribes, Central Asian states, and Korea became "tributaries" of the emperor. Their rulers sent embassies bearing gifts ("tribute") to the imperial court, which fed and housed them, and sent them home with even costlier gifts and reports of China's power, wealth, splendor, and cultural achievements.

After a decade of wars and much devastation, a new emperor restored the dynasty with the help of the Uighur Turks, who looted Chang'an as part of their reward. The recovery and the century of relative peace and prosperity that followed

illustrate the resilience of Tang institutions. China was smaller, but military governors maintained the diminished frontiers. Provincial governors were more autonomous, but taxes were still sent to the capital. Occasional rebellions were suppressed by imperial armies, sometimes led by eunuchs. Most of the emperors were weak, but three strong emperors appeared and reforms were carried out. Edwin O. Reischauer, after translating the diary of a Japanese monk who studied in China during the early ninth century, commented that the "picture of government in operation" that emerges "is amazing for the ninth century, even in China":

*The remarkable degree of centralized control still existing, the meticulous attention to written instructions from higher authorities, and the tremendous amount of paper work involved in even the smallest matters of administration are all the more striking just because this was a period of dynastic decline.*³

Of the reforms of this era, none was more important than that of the land system. The official census, on which land allotments and taxes were based, showed a drop in population from 53 million before the An Lushan rebellion to 17 million



Relief of Tang Emperor's Horse. A bearded "barbarian" groom tends the charger of the second Tang emperor (r. 626–649). This stone relief was found on the emperor's tomb. Note the stirrup, a Chinese invention of the fourth century C.E. *A Relief of Emperor T'ai Tsung's Horse, "Autumn Dew."* University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (NEG.# S8-62840).

³ E. O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in Tang China* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), p. 7.

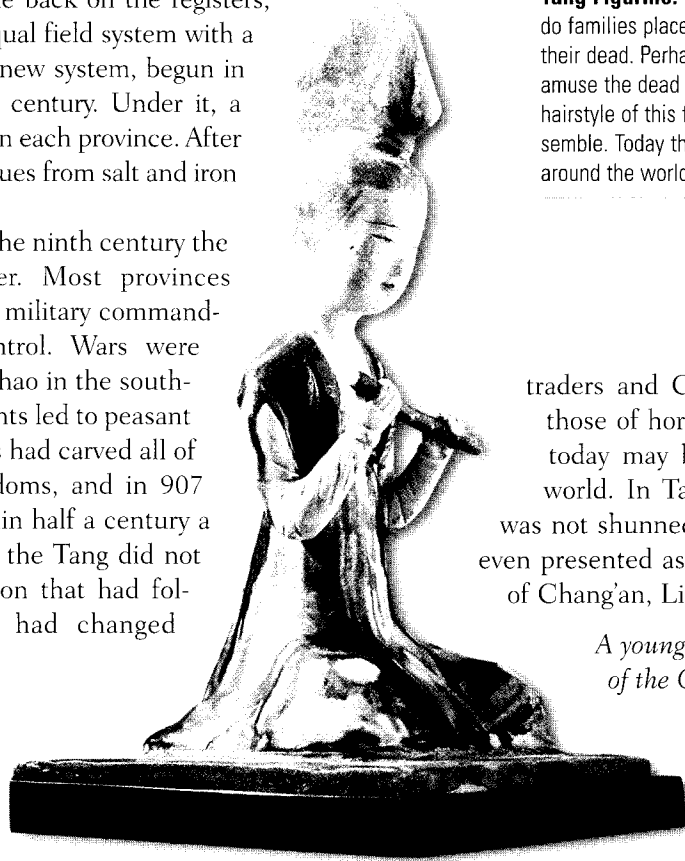
afterward. Unable to put people back on the registers, the government replaced the equal field system with a tax collected twice a year. The new system, begun in 780, lasted until the sixteenth century. Under it, a fixed quota of taxes was levied on each province. After the rebellion, government revenues from salt and iron surpassed those from land.

During the second half of the ninth century the government weakened further. Most provinces were autonomous, often under military commanders, and resisted central control. Wars were fought with the state of Nan Chao in the southwest. Bandits appeared. Droughts led to peasant uprisings. By the 880s warlords had carved all of China into independent kingdoms, and in 907 the Tang dynasty fell. But within half a century a new dynasty arose. The fall of the Tang did not lead to the centuries of division that had followed the Han. Something had changed within China.

Tang Culture The creativity of the Tang period arose from the juxtaposition and interaction of cosmopolitan, medieval Buddhist, and secular elements. The rise of each of these cultural spheres was rooted in the wealth and the social order of the re-created empire.

Tang culture was cosmopolitan not just because of its broad contacts with other cultures and peoples but also because of its openness to them. Buddhist pilgrims to India and a flow of Indian art and philosophies to China were a part of it. The voluptuousness of Indian painting and sculpture, for example, helped shape the Tang representation of the *bodhisattva*. Commercial contacts were widespread. Foreign goods were vended in Chang'an marketplaces. Communities of central and western Asians were established in the capital, and Arab and Persian quarters grew up in the seaports of southeastern China. Merchants brought their religions with them. Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, and Islam entered China at this time. Most would be swept away in the persecutions of the ninth century, but Islam and small pockets of Judaism survived until the twentieth century.

Central Asian music and musical instruments became so popular they almost displaced the native tradition. Tang ladies adopted foreign hairstyles. Dramas and acrobatic performances by western Asians could be seen in the streets of the capital. Even among the pottery figurines customarily placed in tombs there were representations of western Asian



Tang Figurine. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), well-to-do families placed glazed pottery figurines in the tombs of their dead. Perhaps they were intended to accompany and amuse the dead in the afterlife. Note the fancy chignon hairstyle of this female flutist, one figure in a musical ensemble. Today these figurines are sought by collectors around the world. *Werner Forman/Art Resource, N.Y.*

traders and Central Asian grooms, along with those of horses, camels, and court ladies that today may be seen in museums around the world. In Tang poetry, too, what was foreign was not shunned but judged on its own merits or even presented as exotically attractive. Of a gallant of Chang'an, Li Bo wrote:

*A young man of Five Barrows suburb east
of the Golden Market,*

*Silver saddle and white horse
cross through wind of spring.*

*When fallen flowers are tram-
pled all under, where is it
he will roam?*

With a laugh he enters the tav-

ern of a lovely Turkish wench.⁴

Later in the dynasty, another poet, Li He, wrote of service on the frontier:

A Tartar horn tugs at the north wind,

Thistle Gate shines whiter than the stream.

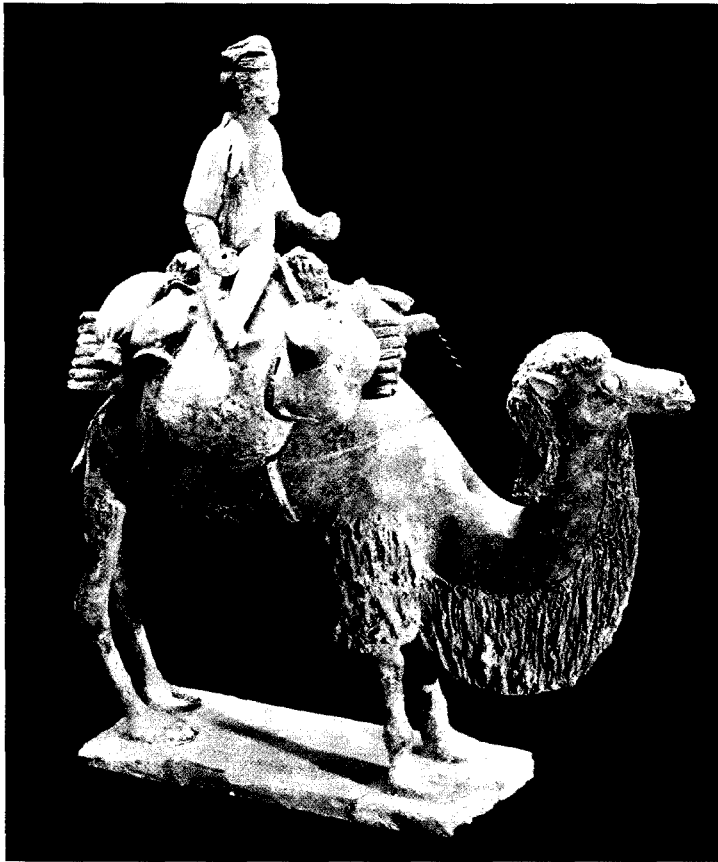
The sky swallows the road to Kokonor.

On the Great Wall, a thousand miles of moonlight.⁵

The Tang dynasty, although slightly less an age of faith than the preceding Six Dynasties, was nonetheless the golden age of Buddhism in China. Patronized by emperors and aristocrats, the Buddhist establishment acquired vast landholdings and great wealth. Temples and monasteries were constructed throughout China. To gain even an inkling of the beauty and sophistication of the temple architecture, the wooden sculpture, or the paintings on the temple walls, one must see Hōryūji or the ancient temples of Nara in Japan, for little of note has survived in China.

⁴S. Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang*. © 1980, (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 130. Reprinted by permission.

⁵A. C. Graham, *Poems of the Late Tang*, trans. by A. C. Graham (Penguin Classics, 1965). Copyright © 1965, A. C. Graham.



Caravaneer on a Camel. The animal's shaggy mane indicates that it is a Bactrian camel from Central Asia. *Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y.*

The single exception is the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang in China's far northwest, which were sealed during the eleventh century for protection from Tibetan raiders and not rediscovered until the twentieth century. They were found to contain stone sculptures, Buddhist frescoes, and thousands of manuscripts in Chinese and Central Asian languages.

Only during the Tang did China have a "church" establishment that was at all comparable to that of medieval Europe, and even then it was subservient to the far stronger Tang state. Buddhist wealth and learning brought with them secular functions. Temples served as schools, inns, or even bathhouses. They lent money. Priests performed funerals and dispensed medicines. Occasionally the state moved to recapture the revenues monopolized by temples. The severest persecution, which marked a turn in the fortunes of Buddhism in China, occurred from 841 to 845, when an ardent Daoist emperor confiscated millions of acres of tax-exempt lands, put back on the tax registers 260,000 monks and nuns, and destroyed 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 shrines.

During the early Tang, the principal Buddhist sect was the Tiantai, but after the mid-ninth-century suppression, other sects came to the fore:

1. One devotional sect focused on Maitreya, a Buddha of the future, who will appear and create a paradise on

earth. Maitreya was a cosmic messiah, not a human figure. The messianic teachings of the sect often furnished the ideology for popular uprisings and rebellions like the White Lotus, which claimed that it was renewing the world in anticipation of Maitreya's coming.

2. Another devotional or faith sect worshiped the **Amitabha Buddha**, the Lord of the Western Paradise or Pure Land. This sect taught that in the early centuries after the death of the historical Buddha, his teachings had been transmitted properly and people could obtain enlightenment by their own efforts, but that at present the Buddha's teachings had become so distorted that only by reliance on Amitabha could humans obtain salvation. All who called on Amitabha with a pure heart and perfect faith would be saved. Developing a congregational form of worship, this sect became the largest in China and deeply influenced Chinese popular religion.
3. A third sect, and the most influential among the Chinese elites, was known in China, where it began, as Chan and is better known in the West by its Japanese name, **Zen**. Zen had no cosmic Buddhas. It taught that the historical Buddha was only a man and exhorted each person to attain enlightenment by his or her own efforts. Although its monks were often the most learned in China, Zen was anti-intellectual in its emphasis on direct intuition into one's own Buddha-nature. Enlightenment was to be obtained by a regimen of physical labor and meditation. To jolt the monk into enlightenment—after he had been readied by long hours of meditation—some Zen sects used little problems not answerable by normal ratiocination: "What was your face before you were conceived?" "If all things return to the One, what does the One return to?" "From the top of a hundred-foot pole, how do you step forward?" The psychological state of the adept attempting to deal with these problems is compared to that of "a rat pursued into a blocked pipe" or "a mosquito biting an iron ball." The discipline of meditation, combined with a Zen view of nature, profoundly influenced the arts in China and subsequently in Korea and Japan as well.

A third characteristic of Tang culture was the reappearance of secular scholarship and letters. The reestablishment of centralized bureaucratic government stimulated the tradition of learning that had been partially interrupted after the fall of the Han dynasty in the third century C.E. A scholarly



A Painting from Dunhuang Monastery showing the bodhisattva Guanyin being worshiped by the painting's donor and his family.

bureaucratic complex emerged. Most men of letters were also officials, and most high-ranking officials painted or wrote poems. An anthology of Tang poetry compiled during the Ming period (1368–1644) contained 48,900 poems by almost 2,300 authors. This secular stream of Tang culture was not ideologically anti-Buddhist. Officials were often privately sympathetic to Buddhism, but as men involved themselves in the affairs of government, their values became increasingly this-worldly.

Court historians of the Tang revived the Han practice of writing an official history of the previous dynasty. For the first time scholars wrote comprehensive institutional histories and regional and local gazetteers. They compiled dictionaries and wrote commentaries on the Confucian classics. Other scholars wrote ghost stories or tales of adventure, using the literary language. (Buddhist sermons, in contrast, were often written in the vernacular.) More paintings were Buddhist than secular, but Chinese landscape painting had its origins during the Tang. Nowhere, however, was the growth of a sec-

ular culture more evident than in poetry, the greatest achievement of Tang letters.

Whether Li Bo (701–762) can be called wholly secular is questionable. He might better be called Daoist. But he clearly was not Buddhist. Born in Sichuan, he was exceptional among Tang poets in never having sat for the civil service examinations, although he briefly held an official post at Chang'an, given in recognition of his poetry. Large and muscular, he was a swordsman and a carouser. Of the 20,000 poems he is said to have composed, 1,800 have survived, and a fair number have titles like "Bring on the Wine" or "Drinking Alone in the Moonlight." According to legend, he drowned while drunkenly attempting to embrace the reflection of the moon in a lake. His poetry is clear, powerful, passionate, and always sensitive to beauty. (See Document, "A Poem by Li Bo.") It also contains a sense of fantasy, as when he climbed a mountain and saw a star-goddess, "stepping in emptiness, pacing pure ether, her rainbow robes trailed broad sashes." Li Bo, nearer to heaven than to earth, looked down below where

*Far and wide Tartar troops were speeding,
And flowing blood mired the wild grasses
Where wolves and jackals all wore officials' caps.⁶*

According to Li Bo, life is brief and the universe is large, but this view did not lead him to renounce the world. His Daoism was not of the quietistic strain close to Buddhism. Rather, he exulted, identifying with the primal flux of yin and yang:

*I'll wrap this Mighty Mudball of a world all up in a bag
And be wild and free like Chaos itself!⁷*

Du Fu (712–770), an equally famous Tang poet, was from a literary family. He failed the metropolitan examination at the age of twenty-three and spent years in wandering and poverty. At thirty-nine he received an official appointment after presenting his poetry to the court. Four years later he was appointed to a military post. He fell into rebel hands during the An Lushan rebellion, escaped, and was reappointed to a civil post. But he was then dismissed and suffered further hardships. His poetry is less lyrical and more allusive than Li Bo's. It also reflects more compassion for human suffering: for the mother whose sons have been conscripted and sent to war; for brothers scattered by war; for his own family, to whom he returned after having been given up for dead. Like Li Bo, he felt that humans are short-lived and that nature endures. Visiting the ruins of the palace of the second Tang emperor, he saw "Grey rats scuttling over ancient tiles" and "in its shadowed chambers ghost

⁶ Owen, p. 134.

⁷ Owen, p. 125.

A Poem by Li Bo

Document

The great Tang poet Li Bo reputedly wrote 20,000 poems, of which 1,800 have survived.

◆ It has been said that concreteness of imagery is the genius of Chinese poetry. How does this poem support that contention?

THE RIVER MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.
At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.
At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?
At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling
eddies,
And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different
mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows
of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you,
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

"The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" by Ezra Pound, from *Personae*. Copyright © 1926 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

fires green." "Its lovely ladies are the brown soil" and only "tomb horses of stone remain." But his response to this sad scene was to

*Sing wildly, let the tears cover your open hands.
Then go ever onward and on the road of your travels,
Meet none who prolong their fated years.*⁸

His response was unlike that of Li Bo. It was close to Stoicism but equally un-Buddhist.

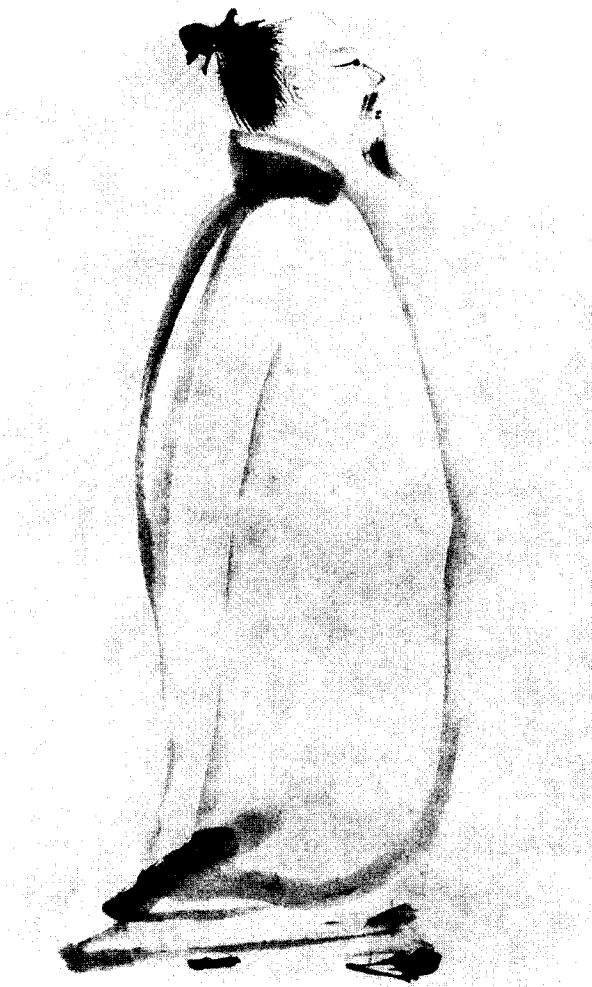
Transition to Late Imperial China: The Song Dynasty (960–1279)

Most traditional Chinese history was written in terms of the dynastic cycle, and for good reason: The pattern of rise and fall, of expansion and contraction, within each dynasty can-

not be denied. Certainly the Song can be viewed from this perspective. It reunified China in 960, establishing its capital at Kaifeng on the Yellow River (see Map 8–3). Mobilizing its resources effectively, it ruled for 170 years; this period is called the Northern Song. Then it weakened. In 1127 it lost the north but for another 150 years continued to rule the south from a new capital at Hangzhou in east-central China. The Southern Song fell before the Mongol onslaught in 1279.

But there is more to Chinese history than the inner logic of the dynastic cycle. Longer term changes that cut across dynastic lines were ultimately more important. One such set of changes began during the late Tang period and continued on into the Song period, affecting its economy, society, state, and culture. Taken together, these changes help to explain why China after the Tang did not relapse into centuries of disunity as it had after the Han, and why China would never again experience more than brief intervals of disunity. In this section we will skip over emperors

⁸ Owen, pp. 223–224.



The Tang Poet Li Bo. As imagined by the great Song artist Liang Kai.
Tokyo National Museum/DNP Archives.Com Co., Ltd.

and empresses, eunuchs and generals, and focus instead on more fundamental transformations.

Agricultural Revolution of the Song: From Serfs to Free Farmers

Landed aristocrats had dominated local society in China during the Sui and Tang periods. The tillers of their lands were little more than serfs. Labor service was the heaviest tax, and whether performed on the office or rank lands of aristocrats or on other government lands, it created conditions of social subordination.

The aristocracy weakened, however, under the Tang and after its fall. Estates were divided among male children at each change of generation. Drawn to the capital,

the aristocracy became less a landed, and more a metropolitan, elite. After the fall of the Tang, the aristocratic estates were often seized by warlords. As the aristocracy declined, the claims of those who worked the soil grew stronger, aided by changes in the land and tax systems. With the collapse of the equal field system (described earlier), farmers could buy and sell land. The ownership of land as private property gave the cultivators greater independence. They could now move about as they pleased. Taxes paid in grain gave way during the Song to taxes in money. The commutation of the labor tax to a money tax gave the farmers more control over their own time. Conscription, the cruelest and heaviest labor tax of all, disappeared as the conscript armies of the early and middle Tang gave way to professional armies.

Changes in technology also benefited the cultivator. New strains of an early-ripening rice permitted double cropping. In the Yangzi region, extensive water-control projects were carried out, and more fertilizers were used. New commercial crops were developed. Tea, which had been introduced during the Six Dynasties as a medicine and had been drunk by monks during the Tang, became widely cultivated; cotton also became a common crop. Because taxes paid in money tended to become fixed, much of the increased productivity accrued to the cultivator. Of course, not all benefited equally; there were landlords and landless tenants as well as independent small farmers.

The disappearance of the aristocrats also increased the authority of the district magistrate, who no longer had to contend with their interference in local affairs. The Song magistrate became the sole representative of imperial authority in local society. But there were too many villages in his district for him to be involved regularly in their internal governance. As long as taxes were paid and order maintained, affairs were left in the hands of the village elites, so the Song farmer enjoyed not only a rising income and more freedom, but also substantial self-government.

One other development that began during the Song—and became vastly more important later—was the appearance of a scholar-gentry class. The typical gentry family contained at least one member who had passed the provincial civil service examination and lived in a district seat or market town. Socially and culturally, these gentry were closer to magistrates than to villagers. But they usually owned land in the villages and thus shared some interests with the local landholders. Although much less powerful than the former aristocrats, they took a hand in local affairs and at times functioned as a buffer between the village and the magistrate's office.

Commercial Revolution of the Song

Stimulated by changes in the countryside, and contributing to them as well, were demographic shifts, innovative technologies, the growth of cities, the spread of money, and rising trade. These developments varied by region, but overall the Song economy reached new prosperity.

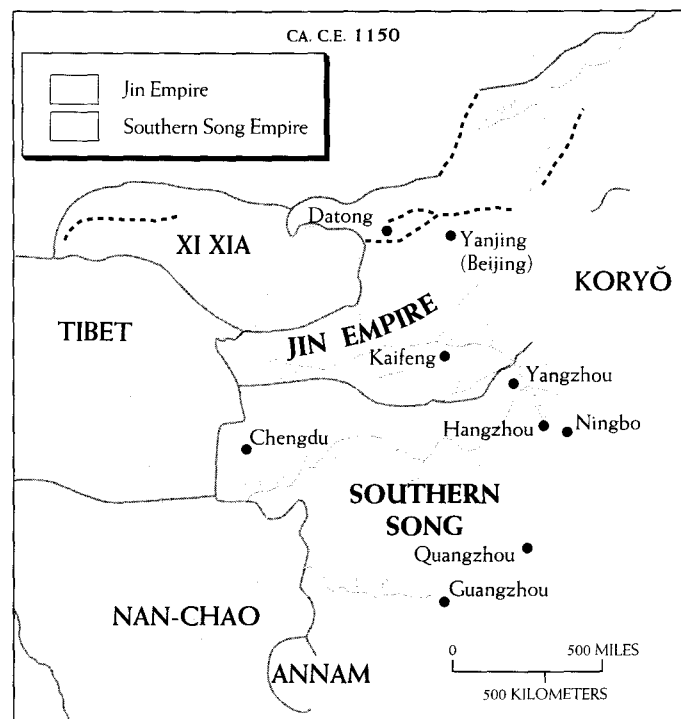
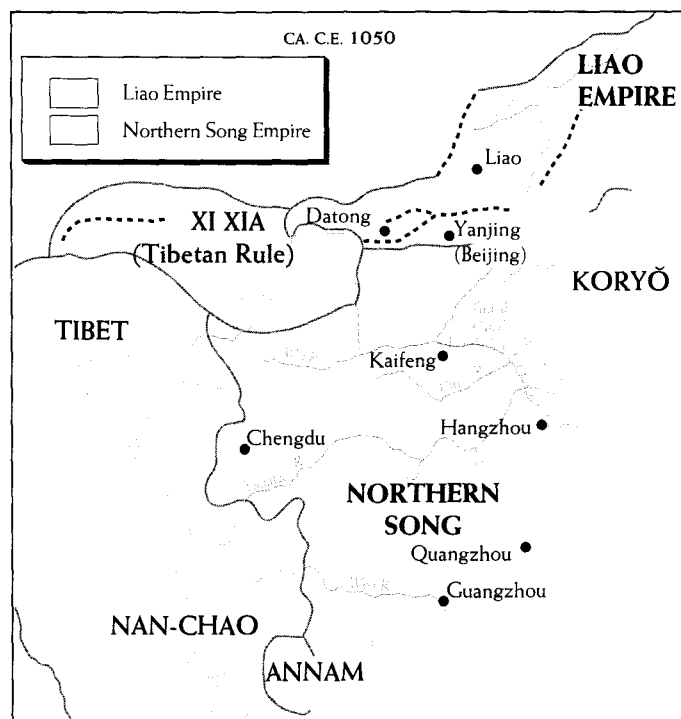
Emergence of the Yangzi Basin Until late in the Tang, the north had been China's most populous and productive region. But from the late ninth century the center of gravity of China's population, agricultural production, and culture shifted to the lower and eastern Yangzi region. Between 800 and 1100 the population of the region tripled as China's total population increased to about 100 million. Its rice paddies yielded more per acre than the wheat or millet fields of the north, making rice the tax base of the empire. Its wealth led to the establishment of so many schools that the government set regional quotas for the examination system to prevent the Yangzi region from dominating all of China. The Northern Song capital itself was kept in the north for strategic reasons, but it was situated at Kaifeng, further east than Luoyang, at the point where the Grand Canal, which carried tax rice from the south, joined the Yellow River.

New Technology During the Northern Song a coal and iron-smelting industry developed in north China that provided China with better tools and weapons. Using coke and bellows to heat furnaces to the temperatures required for carbonized steel, it was the most advanced in the world.

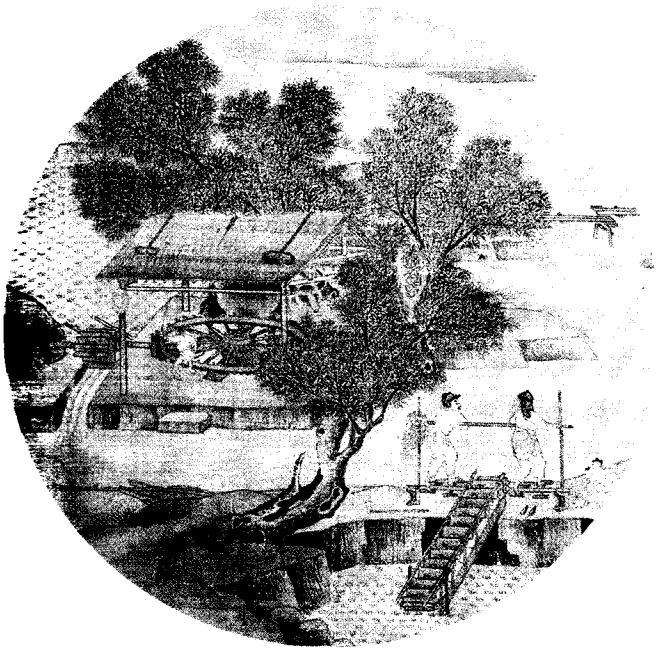
Printing began in China with the use of carved seals. The earliest woodblock texts, mostly on Buddhist subjects, appeared in the seventh century. By the tenth century a complete edition of the classics had been published, and by the mid-Song books printed with movable type were fairly common.

Other advances during the Song were the abacus, the use of gunpowder in grenades and projectiles, and improvements in textiles and porcelains.

Rise of a Money Economy Exchange during the Tang had been based on silk. Coins had been issued, but their circulation was limited. During the Northern Song large amounts of copper cash were coined, but the demand rose more rapidly than the supply. Coins were made with holes in the center, and 1,000 on a string constituted the usual unit for large transactions. Beginning in the Southern Song, silver was minted to complement copper cash, ten times as much silver in the late twelfth century as in the early eleventh century. Letters of credit were used by merchants, and various kinds of paper money were also issued. The penetration of money



Map 8-3. The Northern Song and Liao Empires (Top) and the Southern Song and Jin Empires (Bottom). During the Northern Song, the Mongol Liao dynasty ruled only the extreme northern edge of China. During the Southern Song, in contrast, the Manchurian Jin dynasty ruled half of China.



Irrigation Methods on a Farm in the Yangzi Valley. A farmer and his wife use their legs and feet to work the square-pallet chain pump, a boy uses a water buffalo to turn a water-pumping device, and another boy fishes. © Photograph by Wan-go Weng/Collection of H. C. Weng.

into the village economy was such that by 1065 tax receipts paid in money had risen to 38 million strings of cash—in comparison with a mere 2 million in mid-Tang.

Trade The growth of trade spurred the demand for money. One may distinguish among trade within economic regions, trade between regions, and foreign trade. During the Tang most cities had been administrative, supported by taxes from the countryside. Official salaries and government expenditures created a demand for services and commercial products, making the cities into islands of commerce in a noncommercial hinterland. In most of China's seven or eight economic regions this pattern continued during the Song, but in the capital, and especially in the economically advanced regions along the Yangzi, cities became the hubs of regional commercial networks, with district seats or market towns serving as secondary centers for the local markets beneath them.

As this transition occurred, cities with more than 100,000 households almost quadrupled in number. The Northern Song capital at Kaifeng is recorded as having had 260,000 households—probably more than 1 million inhabitants—and the Southern Song capital at Hangzhou had 391,000 households. Compare these capitals to those of backward Europe: London during the Northern Song had a

population of about 18,000; Rome during the Southern Song had 35,000; and Paris even a century later had fewer than 60,000.

Furthermore, these Song capitals, unlike Chang'an with its walled wards that closed at night, were open within and spread beyond their outer walls. As in present-day Chinese cities, their main avenues were lined with shops. Merchant guilds replaced government officials as the managers of marketplaces. Growing wealth also led to a taste for luxury and an increasingly secular lifestyle. Restaurants, theaters, wine shops, and brothels abounded. Entertainment quarters with fortunetellers, jugglers, chess masters, acrobats, and puppeteers sprang up. Such activity had been present in Chang'an, but the numbers increased, and now they catered to traders and rich merchants as well as to officials.

Trade between regions during the Song was limited mainly to luxury goods like silk, lacquerware, medicinal herbs, and porcelains. Only where transport was cheap—along rivers, canals, or the coast—was interregional trade in bulk commodities economical, and even then it was usually carried on only to make up for specific shortages.

Foreign trade also reached new heights during the Song. In the north, Chinese traders bought horses from Tibetan, Turkic, and Mongol border states and sold silks and tea. Along the coast, Chinese merchants took over the port trade that during the Tang had been in the hands of Korean, Arab, and Persian merchants. The new hegemony of Chinese merchants was based on improved ships using both sail and oars and equipped with watertight compartments and better rudders. Chinese captains, navigating with the aid of the compass, came to dominate the sea routes from Japan in the north to Sumatra in the south. The content of the overseas trade reflected China's advanced economy: It imported raw materials and exported finished goods. Porcelains were sent to Southeast Asia and then were carried by Arab ships to medieval trading centers on the Persian Gulf and down the coast of East Africa as far south as Zanzibar.

Government: From Aristocracy to Autocracy

The millennium of late imperial China after the Tang is often spoken of as the age of autocracy or as China's age of absolute monarchy. Earlier emperors, as we have noted, were often personally powerful, but beginning with the Song, changes occurred that made it easier for emperors to be autocrats.

One change was that Song emperors had direct personal control over more offices than their Tang predecessors. For example, the Board of Academicians, an advisory office, presented the emperor with policy options separate

"Chaste Woman" Shi

Document

Hong Mai (1123–1202 C.E.) was a collector of stories—fantastic, folkloric, and factual. Unlike the usual Confucian homilies on the proper virtues of women, his stories, and those told by other Song storytellers, contained broader perspectives. They reflected the actual diversity of Chinese society. In this story the Chinese belief in ghosts enables the wronged Ning to have a hand in the villain's downfall.

◆ Is the moral of this tale simply that justice ultimately prevails? Can a more complex interpretation be made? What does it say about the dynamics of Song society?

Ning Six of South Meadow village, in the southern suburbs of Jianchang, was a simple-minded man who concentrated on his farming. His younger brother's wife, Miss Shi, was a little sleeker than her peers. She was also ruthless and licentious, and had an adulterous affair with a youth who lived there. Whenever Ning looked askance at her she would scold him and there was not much he could do.

Once Miss Shi took a chicken, wanting to cook it. When Ning learned of it, he went into her room, demanded that she give it to him, then left with it. Miss Shi quickly cut her arm with a knife, then went to the neighbors screaming, "Because my husband is not home, brother-in-law offered me a chicken and tried to force me to have sex with him. I resisted, threatening to kill myself with the knife I was holding, and so just managed to escape."

Ning at that time had no wife, so the neighbors thought she might be telling the truth. They took them to the village headman, then the county jail. The clerks at the jail reviewed the evidence and demanded 10,000 cash to set things right. Ning was poor and stingy, and moreover, knew himself to be in the right, so stubbornly refused. The

clerks sent up the dossier to the prefect Dai Qi. Dai was unable to examine it but noted that it involved an ordinary village wife who was able to protect her virtue and her body and not be violated. The administrative supervisor, Zhao Shiqing, concurred with Qi, and they sent up the case making Ning look guilty. Ning received the death penalty and Miss Shi was granted 100,000 cash, regular visits from the local officials, and a banner honoring her for her chastity. From this, she acquired a reputation as a chaste wife. The local people all realized Ning had been wronged and resented how overboard she had gone.

In the end Miss Shi had an affair with a monk at the nearby Lintian temple. Charges were brought and she received a beating and soon became ill. She saw Ning as a vengeful demon and then died. The date was the sixth month of 1177.

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from those presented by the Secretariat-Chancellery. The emperor could thus use the one against the other and prevent bureaucrats in the Secretariat-Chancellery from dominating the government.

A second change was that the central government was better funded than it had been previously. Revenues in 1100 were three times the peak revenues of the Tang, partly because of the growth of population and agricultural wealth, and partly because of the establishment of government monopolies on salt, wine, and tea and various duties, fees, and taxes levied on domestic and foreign trade. During the Northern Song these commercial revenues rivaled the land tax; during the Southern Song they surpassed it. Confucian officials would continue to stress the primacy of land, but throughout late imperial China, commerce became a vital source of revenues.

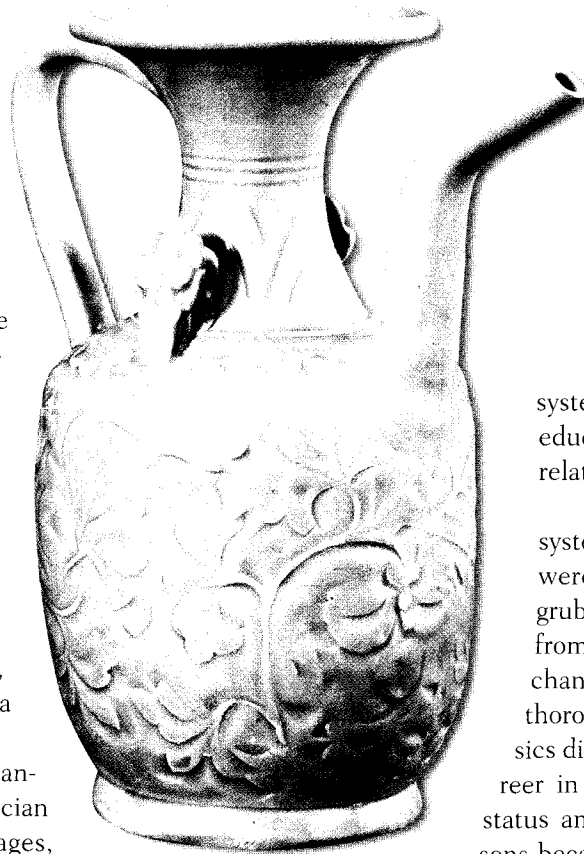
A third change that strengthened the emperors was the disappearance of the aristocracy. During the Tang the emperor had come from the same Sino-Turkic aristocracy of northwestern China as most of his principal ministers, and he was essentially the organ of a state that ruled on behalf of this aristocracy. Aristocrats monopolized the high posts of government. They married among themselves and with the imperial family. They called the emperor the Son of Heaven, but they knew he was one of them. During the Song, in contrast, government officials were commoners, mostly products of the examination system. They were separated from the emperor by an enormous social gulf and saw him as a person apart.

The Song examination system was larger than that of the Tang, though smaller than under later dynasties. Whereas only 10 percent of officials had been recruited by examination during the Tang, the Song figure rose to over 50 percent

and included the most important officials. The first examination was given at regional centers. The applicant took the examination in a walled cubicle under close supervision. To ensure impartiality, his answers were recopied by clerks and his name was replaced by a number before his examination was sent to the officials who would grade it. Of those who sat for the examination, only a tiny percentage passed. The second hurdle was the metropolitan examination at the national capital, where the precautions were equally elaborate. Only one in five, or about two hundred a year, passed. The average successful applicant was in his mid-thirties. The final hurdle was the palace examination, which rejected a few and assigned a ranking to the others.

To pass the examinations, the candidate had to memorize the Confucian classics, interpret selected passages, write in the literary style, compose poems on themes given by the examiners, and propose solutions to contemporary problems in terms of Confucian philosophy. The quality of the officials produced by the Song system was impressive. A parallel might be drawn with nineteenth-century Britain, where students in the classics at Oxford and Cambridge went on to become generalist bureaucrats. The Chinese examination system that flourished during the Song continued, with some interruptions, into the twentieth century. The continuity of Chinese government during this millennium rested on the examination elite, with its common culture and values.

The social base for this examination meritocracy was triangular, consisting of land, education, and office. Landed wealth paid the costs of education. A poor peasant or city dweller could not afford the years of study needed to pass the examinations. Without passing the examinations, an official position was out of reach. And without office, family wealth could not be preserved. The Chinese pattern of inheritance, as noted earlier, led to the division of property at each change of generation. Some families passed the civil service examinations for several generations running. More often, the sons of well-to-do officials did not study as hard as those with bare means. The adage “shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations” is not inappropriate to the Song and later dynasties. As China had an extended-family or clan



An Elegant Song Dynasty Wine Pot

with green celadon glaze (24.8 cm high). Ewer with carved flower sprays. Porcelain with molded and carved low-relief decoration in grayish-green glaze. Northern Song Dynasty (960–1000). H. 9 5/8 in × W. 5 1/4 in × D. 7 3/4 in, H. 24.5 cm × W. 13.4 cm × D. 19.7 cm. China; Shaanxi province. © Gift of The Asian Art Museum Foundation.

system, a wealthy official often provided education for the bright children of poor relations.

How the merchants related to this system is less clear. They had wealth but were despised by scholar-officials as grubby profit seekers and were barred from taking the examinations. Some merchants avoided the system altogether—a thorough education in the Confucian classics did little to fit a merchant’s son for a career in commerce. Others bought land for status and security, and their sons or grandsons became eligible to take the exams. Similarly, a small peasant might build up his holdings,

become a landlord, and educate a son or grandson. The system was steeply hierarchical, but it was not closed nor did it produce a new, self-perpetuating aristocracy.

Song Culture

As society and government changed during the Tang–Song transition, so too did culture. Song culture retained some of the energy of the Tang while becoming more intensely and perhaps more narrowly Chinese. The preconditions for the rich Song culture were a rising economy, an increase in the number of schools and higher literacy, and the spread of printing. Song culture was less aristocratic, less cosmopolitan, and more closely associated with the officials and the scholar-gentry, who were both its practitioners and its patrons. It also was less Buddhist than the Tang had been. Only the Zen (Chan) sect kept its vitality, and many Confucians were outspokenly anti-Buddhist and anti-Daoist. In sum, the secular culture of officials that had been a sidestream in the Tang broadened and became the mainstream during the Song.

Chinese consider the Song dynasty as the peak of their traditional culture. It was, for example, China’s greatest age of pottery and porcelains. High-firing techniques were developed, and kilns were established in every area. There was a rich variety of beautiful glazes. The shapes were restrained

and harmonious. Song pottery, like nothing produced in the world before it, made ceramics a major art form in East Asia. It was also an age of great historians. Sima Guang (1019–1086) wrote *A Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, which treated not a single dynasty but all Chinese history. His work was more sophisticated than previous histories in that it included a discussion of documentary sources and an explanation of why he chose to rely on one source rather than another. The greatest achievements of the Song, however, were in philosophy, poetry, and painting. (See Document, “Chaste Woman Shi.”)

Philosophy The Song was second only to the Zhou as a creative age in philosophy. A series of original thinkers culminated in the towering figure of Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Zhu Xi studied Daoism and Buddhism in his youth, along with Confucianism. A brilliant student, he passed the metropolitan examination at the age of eighteen. During his thirties he focused his attention on Confucianism, deepening and making more systematic its social and political ethics by joining to it certain Buddhist and native metaphysical elements. As a consequence, the new Confucianism became a viable alternative to Buddhism for Chinese intellectuals. Zhu Xi became famous as a teacher at the White Deer Grotto Academy, and his writings were widely distributed. Before the end of the Song, his Confucianism had become the standard interpretation used in the civil service examinations, and it remained so until the twentieth century.

If we search for comparable figures in other traditions, we might pick Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) of medieval Europe or the Islamic theologian al-Ghazali (1058–1111), each of whom produced a new synthesis or worldview that lasted for centuries (see Chapters 16 and 13, respectively). Aquinas combined Aristotle and Latin theology just as Zhu Xi combined Confucian philosophy and metaphysical notions from other sources. Because Zhu Xi used terms such as the “great ultimate” and because he emphasized a Zen-like meditation called “quiet sitting,” some contemporary critics said his Neo-Confucian philosophy was a Buddhist wolf in the clothing of a Confucian sheep. This was unfair. Whereas Aquinas would make philosophy serve religion, Zhu Xi made religion or metaphysics serve philosophy. In his hands, the great ultimate (also known as “principle” or *li*) lost its otherworldly character and became a constituent of all things in the universe. Perhaps the Zhu Xi philosophy may be characterized as innerworldly.

Later critics often argued that Zhu Xi’s teachings encouraged metaphysical speculation at the expense of practical ethics. Zhu Xi’s followers replied that, on the contrary, his teachings gave practical ethics a systematic underpinning and positively contributed to individual moral responsibility. What was discovered within by Neo-Confucian quiet sitting



Song Dynasty Philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). His Neo-Confucian ideas remained central down to the twentieth century. *Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, R.O.C.*

was just those positive ethical truths enunciated by Confucius over 1,000 years earlier. The new metaphysics did not change the Confucian social philosophy.

Zhu Xi himself advocated the selection of scholar-officials through schools, rather than by examinations. It is ironic that his teachings became a new orthodoxy that was maintained by the channelizing effect of the civil service examinations. Historians argue, probably correctly, that Zhu Xi’s teachings were one source of stability in late imperial China. Like the examination system, the imperial institution, the scholar-gentry class, and the land system, his interpretation of Confucianism contributed to continuity and impeded change. Some historians go further and say that the emergence of the Zhu Xi orthodoxy stifled intellectual creativity during later dynasties, which probably is an overstatement. There were always contending schools.

Poetry Song poets were in awe of those of the Tang, yet Song poets were also among China’s best. A Japanese authority on Chinese literature wrote:

Tang poetry could be likened to wine, and Song poetry to tea. Wine has great power to stimulate, but one cannot

*drink it constantly. Tea is less stimulating, bringing to the drinker a quieter pleasure, but one which can be enjoyed more continuously.*⁹

The most famous poet of the Northern Song was Su Dungpo (1037–1101), a man who participated in the full range of the culture of his age: He was a painter and a calligrapher, particularly knowledgeable about inks; he practiced Zen and wrote commentaries on the Confucian classics; he supervised engineering projects; and he was a connoisseur of cooking and wine. His life was shaped by politics. He was a conservative, believing in a limited role for government and social control through morality. (The other faction in the Song bureaucracy was the reformers, who stressed law and an expanded governmental role.)

Passing the metropolitan examination, Su rose through a succession of posts to become the governor of a province—a position of immense power. While considering death sentences, which could not be carried over into the new year, he wrote:

*New Year's Eve—you'd think I could go home early
But official business keeps me.
I hold the brush and face them with tears:
Pitiful convicts in chains,
Little men who tried to fill their bellies,
Fell into the law's net, don't understand disgrace.
And I? In love with a meager stipend
I hold on to my job and miss the chance to retire.
Do not ask who is foolish or wise;
All of us alike scheme for a meal.
The ancients would have freed them a while at New
Year's—Would
I dare do likewise? I am silent with shame.*¹⁰

Eight years later, when the reformers came to power, Su himself was arrested and spent 100 days in prison, awaiting execution on a charge of slandering the emperor. Instead, he was released and exiled. He wrote, “Out the gate, I do a dance, wind blows in my face; our galloping horses race along as magpies cheer.”¹¹ Arriving at his place of exile, he reflected:

*Between heaven and earth I live,
One ant on a giant grindstone,
Trying in my petty way to walk to the right
While the turning of the mill wheel takes me
endlessly left.*

⁹ Kojiro Yoshikawa, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, trans. by Burton Watson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 1967), p. 37.

¹⁰ Yoshikawa, p. 119.

¹¹ Yoshikawa, p. 117.

*Though I go the way of benevolence and duty,
I can't escape from hunger and cold.*¹²

But exile was soon turned to art. He farmed a plot of land at the “eastern slope” from which he took his literary name, Dungpo. Of his work there, he wrote:

*A good farmer hates to wear out the land;
I'm lucky this plot was ten years fallow.
It's too soon to count on mulberries;
My best bet is a crop of wheat.
I planted seed and within the month
Dirt on the rows was showing green.
An old farmer warned me,
Don't let seedlings shoot up too fast!
If you want plenty of dumpling flour
Turn a cow or sheep in here to graze.
Good advice—I bowed my thanks;
I won't forget you when my belly's full.*¹³

After 1086 the conservatives regained control of the government, and Su resumed his official career. In 1094 another shift occurred, and Su was again exiled to the distant southern island of Hainan. After still another shift, Su was on his way back to the capital when he died, in 1101. (See Document, “Su Dungpo Imagined on a Wet Day, Wearing a Rain Hat and Clogs.”)

Painting In the West, penmanship and painting are quite separate, one merely a skill and the other esteemed as an art. In China, calligraphy and painting were equally appreciated and were seen as related. A scholar spent his life with brush in hand. The same qualities of line, balance, and strength needed for calligraphy carried over to painting. Chinese calligraphy is immensely pleasing even to the untutored Western eye, and it is not difficult to distinguish between the elegant strokes of Huineng, the last emperor of the Northern Song, and the powerful brushwork of the Zen monk Zhang Jizhi.

Song painting was varied—of birds or flowers; of fish or insects; of horses, monkeys, or water buffalo; of scholars, emperors, Buddhas, or Daoist immortals. But its crowning achievement was landscapes. Song landscapes are different from those of the West. Each stroke of the brush on silk or paper was final. Mistakes could not be covered up. Each element of a painting was presented in its most pleasing aspect; the painting was not constrained by single-point perspective. Paintings had no single source of illumination with light and shadow but contained an overall diffusion of light. Space was

¹² Yoshikawa, p. 105.

¹³ Yoshikawa, pp. 119–120.

Su Dongpo Imagined on a Wet Day, Wearing a Rain Hat and Clogs

Document

After Su's death, a disciple wrote these lines.

- ◆ How does the sentiment in this poem relate to the Confucian humanism encountered in the document in Chapter 2?



東坡先生笠屐圖

*When with tall hat and firm baton he stood in council,
The crowds were awed at the dignity of the statesman
in him.
But when in cloth cap he strolled with cane and sandals,
He greeted little children with gentle smiles.*

From *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, by Kojiro Yoshikawa, trans. by Burton Watson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). Copyright © 1967 by the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Monograph Series, poem, p. 122, illustration located on unnumbered page opposite p. 65. Reprinted by permission of Harvard-Yenching Institute.

an integral part of the painting. A typical painting might have craggy rocks or twisted pine trees in the foreground, then mist or clouds or rain to create distance, and in the background the outlines of mountains or cliffs fading into space. If the painting contained human figures at all, they were small in a natural universe that was very large. Chinese painting thus reflected the same worldview as Chinese philosophy or poetry. The painter sought to grasp the inner reality of the scene and not be bound up in surface details.

In paintings by monks or masters of the Zen school, the presentation of an intuitive vision of an inner reality became even more pronounced. Paintings of Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of the Zen sect, are often dominated by a single powerful downstroke of the brush, defining the edge of

his robe. Paintings of patriarchs tearing up sutras or sweeping dust with a broom from the mirror of the mind are almost as calligraphic as paintings of bamboo. A Yuan dynasty painting in the style of Shi Ke shows the figure of a monk or sage who is dozing or meditating. A Zen “broken ink” landscape might contain rocks, water, mountains, and clouds, each represented by a few explosive strokes of the brush.

China in the Mongol World Empire: The Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)

The Mongols created the greatest empire in the history of the world. It extended from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific



An ink on silk handscroll, Southern Song Dynasty. The vast expanse of nature is hardly affected by the human presence.

Ocean; from Russia, Siberia, and Korea in the north to Persia and Burma in the south. Invasion fleets were even sent to Java and Japan, although without success. Mongol rule in China is one chapter of this larger story.

Rise of the Mongol Empire

The Mongols, a nomadic people, lived to the north of China on grasslands where they raised horses and herded sheep. They lived in felt tents called yurts—they sometimes called themselves “the people of the felt tents.” Women performed much of the work and were freer and more easygoing than women in China. Families belonged to clans and related clans to tribes. Tribes would gather during the annual migration from the summer plains to winter pasturage. Chiefs were elected, most often from noble lineages, for their courage, military prowess, judgment, and leadership. Like Manchu or Turkic, the Mongol language was Altaic.

The Mongols believed in nature deities and in the sky god above all others. Sky blue was their sacred color. They communicated with their gods through religious specialists called *shamans*. Politically divided, they traded and warred among themselves and with settled peoples on the borders of their vast grassland domains.

The founder of the Mongol Empire, Temujin, was born in 1167, the son of a tribal chief. While Temujin was still a child, his father was poisoned. He fled and after wandering for some years, returned to the tribe, avenged his father, and in time became chief himself. Through his shrewd policy of alliances and remarkable survival qualities, by the time he was forty, he had united all Mongol tribes and had been elected their great khan, or ruler. It is by the title *Genghis* (also spelled *Jenghiz* or *Chinggis*) *Khan* that he is known to history. Genghis possessed an extraordinary charisma, and his sons and grandsons also became wise and talented

leaders. Why the Mongol tribes, almost untouched by the higher civilizations of the world, should have produced such leaders at this point in history is difficult to explain.

A second conundrum is how the Mongols, who numbered only about 1.5 million, created the army that conquered vastly denser populations. Part of the answer is institutional. Genghis organized his armies into “myriads” of 10,000 troops, with decimal subdivisions of 1,000, 100, and 10. Elaborate signals were devised so that in battle, even large units could be manipulated like the fingers of a hand. Mongol tactics were superb: Units would retreat, turn, flank, and destroy their enemies. The historical record makes amply clear that Genghis’s nomadic cavalry had a paralytic effect on the peoples they encountered. The Mongols were peerless horsemen, and their most dreaded weapon was the compound bow, short enough to be used from the saddle yet more powerful than the English longbow.

They were astonishingly mobile. Each man carried his own supplies. Trailing remounts, they covered vast distances quickly. In 1241, for example, a Mongol army had reached Hungary, Poland, and the shore of the Adriatic and was poised for a further advance into Western Europe. But when word arrived of the death of the great khan, the army turned and galloped back to Mongolia to help choose his successor.

When this army encountered walled cities, it learned the use of siege weapons from the enemies it had conquered. Chinese engineers were used in campaigns in Persia. The Mongols also used terror as a weapon. Inhabitants of cities that refused to surrender in the Near East and China were put to the sword. Large areas in north China and Sichuan were devastated and depopulated. Descriptions of the Mongols by those whom they conquered dwell on their physical toughness and pitiless cruelty.

But the Mongols had strengths that went beyond the strictly military. Genghis opened his armies to recruits from



Chinese engineers were used in campaigns in Persia. The Mongols also used terror as a weapon. Inhabitants of cities that refused to surrender in the Near East and China were put to the sword. Large areas in

the Uighur Turks, the Manchus, and other nomadic peoples. As long as they complied with the military discipline demanded of his forces, they could participate in his triumphs. In 1206 Genghis promulgated laws designed to prevent the normal wrangling and warring between tribes that would undermine his empire. Genghis also obtained thousands of pledges of personal loyalty from his followers, and he appointed these "vassals" to command his armies and staff his government. This policy gave his forces an inner coherence that countered the divisive effect of tribal loyalties.

The Mongol conquests were all the more impressive in that, unlike the earlier Arab expansion, they lacked the unifying force of religious zeal. To be sure, at an assembly of chiefs in 1206, an influential shaman revealed that it was the sky god's will that Genghis conquer the world. Yet other unabashedly frank words attributed to Genghis may reveal a truer image of what lay behind the Mongol drive to conquest: "Man's highest joy is in victory: to conquer one's enemies, to pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep, to ride on their horses, and to embrace their wives and daughters."¹⁴

Genghis divided his far-flung empire among his four sons. Trade and communications were maintained between the parts, but over several generations, each of the four khanates became independent. The khanate of Chagatai was in Central Asia and remained purely nomadic. A second khanate of the Golden Horde ruled Russia from the lower Volga. The third was in Persia, and the fourth, led by those who succeeded Genghis as great khans, centered first in Mongolia and then in China (see Map 8-4).

Mongol Rule in China

The standard theory used in explaining Chinese history is the dynastic cycle. A second theory explains Chinese history in terms of the interaction between the settled peoples of China and nomads of the steppe. When strong states emerged in China, their wealth and population enabled them to expand militarily onto the steppe. But when China was weak, as was more often the case, the steppe peoples overran China. To review briefly:

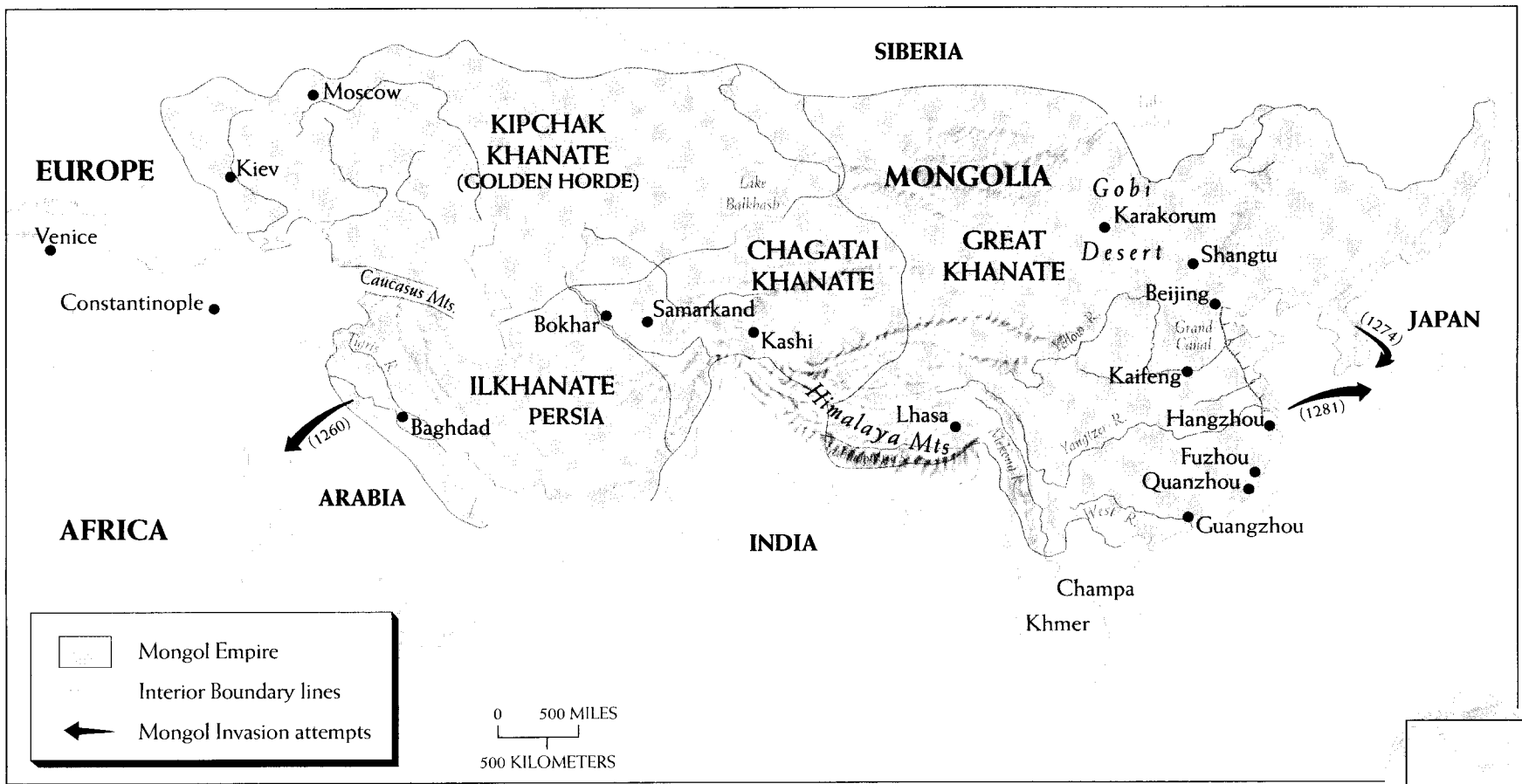
¹⁴ J. K. Fairbank, E. O. Reischauer, and A. M. Craig, *East Asia, Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 164.



Kublai Khan. Wearing ermine coat, the Mongol emperor sits on a horse amongst Mongol warriors at the hunt. At his side is his consort, Chabi. *National Palace Museum, Taiwan, R.O.C.*

1. During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the most pressing problem in foreign relations was the Xiongnu Empire to the north.
2. During the centuries that followed the Han, various nomadic peoples invaded and ruled northern China.
3. The energy and institutions of these Sino-Turkic rulers of the northern dynasties shaped China's reunification during the Sui (589–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties. The Uighur Turks also played a major role in Tang defense policy.
4. Northern border states became even more important during the Song. The Northern Song (960–1126) bought peace with payments of gold and silver to the Liao. The Southern Song (1126–1279), for all its cultural brilliance, was little more than a tributary state of the Jin dynasty, which had expanded into northern China.

From the start of the Mongol pursuit of world hegemony, the riches of China were a target, but Genghis proceeded cautiously, determined to leave no enemy at his back. He first disposed of the Tibetan state to the northwest of China and then the Manchu state of Jin that ruled north China. Mongol forces took Beijing in 1227, the year Genghis died. They went on to take Luoyang and the southern reaches of the Yellow River in 1234, and all of north China by 1241. During this time, the Mongols were interested mainly in loot. Only later did Chinese



Map 8-4. The Mongol Empire in the Late thirteenth Century. Note the four khanates: the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate in Persia, Chagatai in Central Asia, and the Great Khanate extending from Mongolia to southern China.

advisers persuade them that more wealth could be obtained by taxation.

Kublai, a grandson of Genghis, was chosen as the great khan in 1260. In 1264 he moved his capital from Karakorum in Mongolia to Beijing. It was only in 1271 that he adopted a Chinese dynastic name, the Yuan, and, as a Chinese ruler, went to war with the Southern Song. Once the decision was made, the Mongols swept across southern China. The last Song stronghold fell in 1279.

Kublai Khan's rule in Beijing reflected the mixture of cultural elements in Mongol China. From Beijing, Kublai could rule as a Chinese emperor, which would not have been possible in Karakorum. He adopted the Chinese custom of hereditary succession. He rebuilt Beijing as a walled city in the Chinese style. But Beijing was far to the north of any previous Chinese capital, away from centers of wealth and population; to provision it, the Grand Canal had to be extended. From Beijing, Kublai could look out onto Manchuria and Mongolia and maintain ties with the other khanates. The city proper was for the Mongols. It was known to the West as Cambulac, "the city (baliq) of the khan." Chinese were segregated in an adjoining walled city. The palace of the khan was designed by an Arab architect; its rooms were Central Asian in style. Kublai also maintained a summer palace at Shangdu (the "Xanadu" of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem) in Inner Mongolia, where he could hawk and ride and hunt in Mongol style.

Early Mongol rule in northern China was rapacious and exploitative, but it later shifted towards Chinese forms of government and taxation, especially in the south and at the local level. Because it was a foreign military occupation, civil administration was highly centralized. Under the emperor was a Central Secretariat, and beneath it were ten "Moving Secretariats," which became the provinces of later dynasties. These highly centralized institutions and the arbitrary style of Mongol decision-making accelerated the trend towards absolutism that had started during the previous dynasty.

About 400,000 Mongols lived in China during the Yuan period. For such a tiny minority to control the Chinese majority, it had to stay separate. One measure was to make military service a monopoly of Mongols and their nomadic allies. Garrisons were established throughout China, with a strategic reserve on the steppe. Military officers were always regarded as more important than civil officials. A second measure was to use ethnic classifications in appointing civil officials. The highest category was the Mongols, who held the top civil and military posts. The second category included Persians, Turks, and other non-Chinese, who were given high civil posts. The third category was the northern Chinese, including

Manchus and other border peoples, and the fourth was the southern Chinese. Even when the examination system was sporadically revived after 1315, the Mongols and their allies took an easier examination; their quota was as large as that for Chinese, and they were appointed to higher offices.

The net result was an uneasy symbiosis. Chinese officials directly governed the Chinese populace, collecting taxes, settling disputes, and maintaining the local order. Few of these officials ever learned to speak Mongolian, yet without their positive cooperation, Mongol rule in China would have been impossible. The Mongols, concentrated in Beijing, large cities, and in garrisons, spoke Mongolian among themselves and usually did not bother to learn Chinese. A few exceptions wrote poetry in Chinese and painted in the Chinese style. Communication was through interpreters. When a Chinese district magistrate sent a query to the court, the ruling was made in Mongolian. (The Mongols had borrowed the alphabet of the Uighurs to transcribe their tongue.) A word-for-word translation in Chinese was written below the Mongolian and passed back down to the magistrate. As the two languages are syntactically very different, the resulting Chinese was grotesque.

Foreign Contacts and Chinese Culture

Diplomacy and trade within the greater Mongol Empire brought China into contact with other higher civilizations for the first time since the Tang period. Persia and the Arab world were especially important. Merchants, missionaries, and diplomats voyaged from the Persian Gulf and across the Indian Ocean to seaports in southeastern China. The Arab communities in Guangzhou and other ports were larger than they had been during the Song. Camel caravans carrying silks and ceramics left Beijing to pass through the Central Asian oases and on to Baghdad. Although the Mongols did not favor Chinese merchants and most trade was in other hands, Chinese trade also expanded. Chinese communities became established in Tabriz, the center of trading in western Asia, and in Moscow and Novgorod. It was during this period that knowledge of printing, gunpowder, and Chinese medicine spread to western Asia. Chinese ceramics influenced those of Persia as Chinese painting influenced Persian miniatures.

In Europe, knowledge of China was transmitted by the Venetian trader Marco Polo, who said he had served Kublai as an official between 1275 and 1292. His book, *A Description of the World*, was translated into most European languages. (See

Marco Polo Describes the City of Hangzhou

Document

Marco Polo was a Venetian. In 1300 Venice had a population of more than 100,000 and was the wealthiest Mediterranean city-state. But Polo was nonetheless unprepared for what he saw in China. Commenting on Hangzhou, China's capital during the Southern Song, he first noted its size (ten or twelve times larger than Venice), then its many canals and bridges, its streets "paved with stones and bricks," and its location between "a lake of fresh and very clear water" and "a river of great magnitude." He spoke of "the prodigious concourse of people" frequenting its ten great marketplaces and of its "capacious warehouses built of stone for the accommodation of merchants who arrive from India and other parts." He then described the life of its people.

◆ Europeans who read Marco Polo's account of China thought it was too good to be true. Would you agree?

Each of the ten market-squares is surrounded with high dwelling-houses, in the lower part of which are shops, where every kind of manufacture is carried on, and every article of trade is sold; such, amongst others, as spices, drugs, trinkets, and pearls. In certain shops nothing is vended but the wine of the country, which they are continually brewing, and serve out fresh to their customers at a moderate price. The streets connected with the market-squares are numerous, and in some of them are many cold baths, attended by servants of both sexes, to perform the offices of ablution for the men and women who frequent them, and who from their childhood have been accustomed at all times to wash in cold water, which they reckon highly conducive to health. At these bathing places, however, they have apartments provided with warm water, for the use of strangers, who from not being habituated to it, cannot bear the shock of the cold. All are in the daily practice of washing their persons, and especially before their meals.

In other streets are the habitations of the courtesans, who are here in such numbers as I dare not venture to report; and not only near the squares, which is the situation usually appropriated for their residence, but in every part of the city they are to be found, adorned with much finery, highly perfumed, occupying well-furnished houses, and attended by many female domestics. These women are accomplished, and are perfect in the arts of blandishment and dalliance, which they accompany with expressions adapted to every description of person, insomuch that strangers who have once become so enchanted by their meretricious arts, that they can never divest themselves of the impression. Thus intoxicated with sensual pleasures, when they return to their homes they report that they have been in Kin-sai [Hangzhou], or the celestial city, and pant for the time when they may be enabled to revisit paradise.

The inhabitants of the city are idolaters, and they use paper money as currency. The men as well as the women have fair complexions, and are handsome. The greater part

of them are always clothed in silk, in consequence of the vast quantity of that material produced in the territory of Kin-sai, exclusively of what the merchants import from other provinces. Amongst the handicraft trades exercised in the place, there are twelve considered to be superior to the rest, as being more generally useful; for each of which there are a thousand workshops, and each shop furnishes employment for ten, fifteen, or twenty workmen, and in a few instances as many as forty; under their respective masters. The natural disposition of the native inhabitants of Kin-sai is pacific, and by the example of their former kings, who were themselves unwarlike, they have been accustomed to habits of tranquility. The management of arms is unknown to them, nor do they keep any in their houses. Contentious broils are never heard among them. They conduct their mercantile and manufacturing concerns with perfect candour and probity. They are friendly towards each other, and persons who inhabit the same street, both men and women, from the mere circumstance of neighbourhood, appear like one family. In their domestic manners they are free from jealousy or suspicion of their wives, to whom great respect is shown, and any man would be accounted infamous who should presume to use indecent expressions to a married woman. To strangers also, who visit their city in the way of commerce, they give proofs of cordiality, inviting them freely to their houses, showing them hospitable attention, and furnishing them with the best advice and assistance in their mercantile transactions. On the other hand, they dislike the sight of soldiery, not excepting the guards of the grand khan, as they preserve the recollection that by them they were deprived of the government of their native kings and rulers.

Excerpt from *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 1908, from Everyman's Library. Reprinted by permission of David Campbell Publishers, London, pp. 290–301.



The Journey of Marco Polo. Marco Polo and companions en route to China on the Silk Road.
Getty Images, Inc/Hulton Archive Photos.

Document, “Marco Polo Describes the City of Hangzhou.”) Many readers doubted that a land of such wealth and culture could exist so far from Europe, but the book excited an interest in geography. When Christophe Columbus set sail in 1492, his goal was to reach Polo’s Zipangu (Japan).

The greatest of all Muslim travelers, the Moroccan Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1370) traveled throughout much of the Mongol world in the fourteenth century. His observations are a rich source of information about the societies he visited. Ever curious, he had a sharp eye for detail: “The Chinese infidels eat the flesh of swine and dogs, and sell it in their markets. They are wealthy folk and well-to-do, but they make no display either in their food or their clothes.”

Other cultural contacts were fostered by the Mongol toleration or encouragement of religion. Nestorian Christianity, spreading from Persia to Central Asia, reentered China during the Mongol era. Churches were built in main cities. The mother of Kublai Khan was a Nestorian Christ-

ian. Also, several papal missions were sent from Rome to the Mongol court. An archbishopric was established in Beijing; a church was built, sermons were preached in Turkish or Mongolian, and choirboys sang hymns. Kublai sent Marco Polo’s father and uncle with a letter to the pope asking for 100 intelligent men acquainted with the seven arts.

Tibetan Buddhism with its magical doctrines and elaborate rites was the religion most favored by the Mongols, but Chinese Buddhism also flourished. Priests and monks of all religions were given tax exemptions. It is estimated that half a million Chinese became Buddhist monks during the Mongol century. The foreign religion that made the greatest gains was Islam, which became permanently established in Central Asia and western China. Mosques were built in the Islamic areas, in Beijing, and in southeastern port cities. Even Confucianism was

from *The History of the Life and Travels of Rabban Bar Sauma*

Last Years of the Yuan

Despite the Mongol military domination of China and the highly centralized institutions of the Mongol court, the Yuan was the shortest of China's major dynasties. Little more than a century elapsed between Kublai's move to Beijing in 1264 and the dynasty's collapse in 1368. The rule of Kublai and his successor had been effective, but thereafter a decline set in. By then, the Mongol Empire as a whole no longer lent strength to its parts. The khanates became separated by religion and culture as well as by distance. Even tribesmen in Mongolia rebelled now and then against the great khans in Beijing, who, in their eyes, had become too Chinese. The court at Beijing, too, had never really gained legitimacy. Some Chinese officials served it loyally to the end, but most Chinese saw the government as carpetbaggers and Mongol rule as a military occupation. When succession disputes, bureaucratic factionalism, and pitched battles between Mongol generals broke out, Chinese showed little inclination to rally in support of the dynasty.

Problems also arose in the countryside. Taxes were heavy, and some local officials were corrupt. The government issued excessive paper money and then refused to accept it in payment for taxes. The Yellow River changed its course, flooding the canals that carried grain to the capital. At great cost and suffering, a labor force of 150,000 workers and 20,000 soldiers rerouted the river to the south of the Shandong Peninsula. Further natural disasters during the 1350s led to popular uprisings. The White Lotus sect preached the coming of Maitreya. Regional military commanders, suppressing the rebellions, became independent of central control. Warlords arose. The warlord who ruled Sichuan was infamous for his cruelty. Important economic regions were devastated and in part depopulated by rebellions. At the end, a rebel army threatened Beijing, and the last Mongol emperor and his court fled on horses to Shangdu. When that city fell, they fled still deeper into the plains of Mongolia.

Summary

Sui and Tang Dynasties. The Sui and Tang dynasties (589–907) reunited China's empire. Under the Tang, China expanded into Central Asia, taking control of much of the lucrative Silk Road along which trade moved to the West. Chang'an, the Tang capital, became the largest city in the world. Tang culture was rich and cosmopolitan, much influenced by its contacts with other cultures and immensely

regarded as a religion by the Mongols, and its teachers were exempted from taxes. But as the scholar-gentry rarely obtained important offices, they saw the Mongol era as a time of hardship.

Despite these wide contacts with other peoples and religions, the high culture of China appears to have been influenced almost not at all—partly because China had little to learn from other areas, and partly because the centers of Chinese culture were in the south, the last area to be conquered and the area least affected by Mongol rule. Also, in reaction to the Mongol conquest, Chinese culture became conservative and turned in on itself. Scholars wrote poetry in the style of the Song. New schools of painting developed, but the developments were from within the Chinese tradition, and the greatest Yuan paintings continued the style of the Song. Yuan historians wrote the official history of the dynasties that preceded it. The head of the court bureau of historiography was a Mongol, but the histories produced by his Chinese staff were in the traditional mold. As the dynasty waned, unemployed scholars wrote essays expressing loyalty toward the Song and satirizing the Mongols. Their writings were not censored: The Mongols either could not read them, did not read them, or did not care.

The major contribution to Chinese arts during the Yuan was by dramatists, who combined poetic arias with vaudeville theater to produce a new operatic drama. Performed by traveling troupes, the operas used few stage props. They relied for effect on makeup, costumes, pantomime, and stylized gestures. The women's roles were usually played by men. Except for the arias—the highlights of the performance—the dramas used vernacular Chinese, appealing to a popular audience. The unemployed scholars who wrote the scripts drew on the entire repertoire of the Song storyteller. Among the stock figures in the operas were a Robin Hood-like bandit; a famous detective-judge; the Tang monk who traveled to India; warriors and statesmen of the Three Kingdoms; and romantic heroes, villains, and ghosts. Justice always triumphed, and the dramas usually ended happily. In several famous plays the hero gets the girl, despite objections by her parents and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, by passing the civil service examinations in first place. As the examinations were not in effect during most of the Yuan, this resolution of the hero's predicament is one that looked back to the Song pattern of government. Yuan drama continued almost unchanged in later dynasties, and during the nineteenth century it merged with a form of southern Chinese theater to become today's Beijing Opera.

influential on the cultures of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The Tang dynasty was also the golden age of Buddhism in China, and a variety of Buddhist sects flourished.

Song Dynasty. Under the Song dynasty (960–1279), China experienced an agricultural revolution in which large aristocratic estates worked by serfs gave way to small land holdings owned by free farmers. Advances in technology led to the invention of printing and the development of a coal and iron-smelting industry. The growth of a money economy encouraged the expansion of trade, both within China and with foreign countries. Song culture was particularly rich in philosophy, poetry, and painting.

The Mongols. After their unification by Genghis Khan (1167–1227), the Mongols created the greatest empire in history. The highly mobile Mongol cavalry overwhelmed Chinese armies. By 1279 the Mongols ruled all of China. But Mongol rule in China was short-lived and enjoyed only shallow Chinese support. Mongol rule in China ended in 1368.

Review Questions

1. Why could China re-create its empire—just 400 years after the fall of the Han—but Rome could not? Are there similarities between the Qin-Han transition and that of the Sui-Tang? Between Han and Tang expansion and contraction?
2. How did the Chinese economy change from the Tang to the Northern Song to the Southern Song? How did the polity change? How did China's relationships to surrounding states change?
3. What do Chinese poetry and art tell us about Chinese society? About women? What position did poets occupy in Chinese society?
4. What drove the Mongols to conquer most of the known world? How could their military accomplish the task? Once they conquered China, how did they rule it? What was the Chinese response to Mongol rule?

INTERPRETING THE PAST



Travelers' Accounts

The following travelers' accounts of China, southern Russia, and surrounding regions offer the reader varied perspectives into twelfth- and thirteenth-century society and culture in Asia. Analyze several of these documents in order to understand *why* they were written and *who* the potential readers/audience were.

Text Sources from the Primary Source DVD / MyHistoryLab

Lu You, *Excerpt of a Diary of a Journey to Sichuan*

Marco Polo, excerpt from *Travels*



Excerpt from *History of Life and Travels of Rabban Bar Sauma*

Excerpt from *William of Rubruck's Account of the Mongols*

Text Source from Chapter 8

Marco Polo Describes the City of Hangzhou, p. 269.

Questions

First determine the primary themes/subjects of each account. Choose several examples of details in each account that provide clues to the writer's interest and attitudes towards these subjects.

Several of the accounts (those authored by Lu You and Marco Polo, for example) focus on journeys without obvious, specific assignments. How do these descriptions of people, places, and events differ in focus from those of modern travelers or tourists? Are there any similarities?

The other documents referred to here (those authored by Rabban Bar Sauma, William of Rubruck) are concerned with journeys with specific purposes (trade and diplomacy), sponsored by rulers. What kinds of differences